

THE PARABLES OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

WELL do we know that no portion of the New Testament will be more lovingly or fruitfully read in the bosom of the Christian family than this, which embraces the divine lessons given us in the Parables. We, therefore, abstain from giving any theory of our own to enable the reader to understand thoroughly not only the sublime truths that underlie each parable in particular, but the reason that induced our Lord to teach by parables, and the general scope of this portion of His teaching. Fortunately, in our own days one of the most beautiful minds which Oxford has given to the Catholic Church, and one of those who have best caught the spirit of St. Ignatius in interpreting the Scriptures, Father Henry James Coleridge, has found a Key to the Parables. We, therefore, deem it a precious service to Christian families to abridge here for them the pregnant pages taken from "The Life of our Life."

Although in the first period of our Lord's teaching there is more than one instance of His conveying instruction in the form of a parable, as in St. Luke vii. 40-48, nevertheless, it is only a short time before the death of St. John the Baptist and the sending of His disciples on their first mission. The opposition of the Scribes and Pharisees had taken a much more violent and malignant form, not only with regard to our Lord's way of understanding how the Sabbath was to be kept, but concerning His miracles themselves; which these wilfully blind men attributed to Beelzebub. It is near Capharnaum or Bethsaida, on the border of the Sea of Galilee, and seated on a fishing-boat near the shore and within hearing of the mixed multitude, that He began to teach in this form. It was, like fables and similitudes, a way of putting truths which the memory seized and retained. The well-disposed hearers bore the parable away with them, like a precious fruit to be eaten with delight in their own privacy. The inattentive did not care to remember and to understand, letting the precious fruit dropped from the Tree of Knowledge lie unheeded on the ground.

While the evil-minded hearers could not find in this indirect and covert mode of teaching or rebuke a subject for formal accusation.

"There never seems to have been a time when our Lord lost His wonderful charm and power in their eyes. But the continuance of His preaching in Galilee must have taken away the

freshness of His influence, and there must have been very many who had heard Him without profiting by what they heard, with whom, according to the inevitable law which prevails in the Spiritual order, opportunities neglected and warnings unheeded, revenged themselves, as it were, in increasing hardness and dulness of heart. There may also have been some who grew colder towards Him in proportion as it became apparent that He was in disfavor with the ecclesiastical authorities. The power of the rulers at Jerusalem was very great, as we see both in our Lord's own Life and in the history of the Acts, and when this influence was thrown continually and strongly into the scale against Him, there must have been very many whom it would tend to drive away from Him. Our Lord met this difference in the people by a change in the manner of His teaching, which is noticed as important by each of the three historical Evangelists. This form of teaching has the great advantage of being intelligible to those who are attentive and dili-



gent, and whose hearts are eager for Divine truth, while it conveys comparatively little or nothing to those who are taken up with worldly cares, or who are the servants of passion. Thus it avoids the danger of which our Lord spoke in His Sermon on the Mount, of what, using at the time a parabolic image, He called casting pearls before swine, and giving that which is holy to dogs. Again, such a method of teaching is a shield against any malevolence which may exist in a part of the audience, and on more than one occasion, as we shall see, must have baffled our Lord's enemies, watchful and insidious as they were.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON.

ST. LUKE XV.



"The subject-matter of our Lord's teaching by parables was also different from that of which the Sermon on the Mount treats, although we have several later parables in the Gospels, which seem to have the same scope, such as that of the Unmerciful Servant or the Ten Virgins. But in general the parables, especially the first great cluster of them which begins with the Parable of the Sower, seem intended to sketch certain great truths as to the character of God as manifested in the government of the world, and also the manner in which men receive and



THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

ST. MARK XII.

deal with the graces and mercies which are offered to them by God. These were subjects which, especially from the time when the opposition to our Lord took the form of calumnies which imputed His miraculous works to the agency of Satan, and so involved the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, He did not wish either to hide from those whose hearts were still sound, or to thrust without reserve upon the notice of those to whom they would do harm, or whom they might prompt to still more violent hostility.



"We believe that it will be found easier to grasp the main idea of the parables as a whole, if we consider that they are meant to illustrate one great head of doctrine which is most naturally fitted for promulgation under this particular form. The parables differ, of course, from the other teaching of our Lord in their descriptive character, the lesson being left to be gathered from the truths involved in the description. And that which is the subject of the description, that one great head to which the parables refer, is, *God in His dealings with His creatures, and especially with man* .

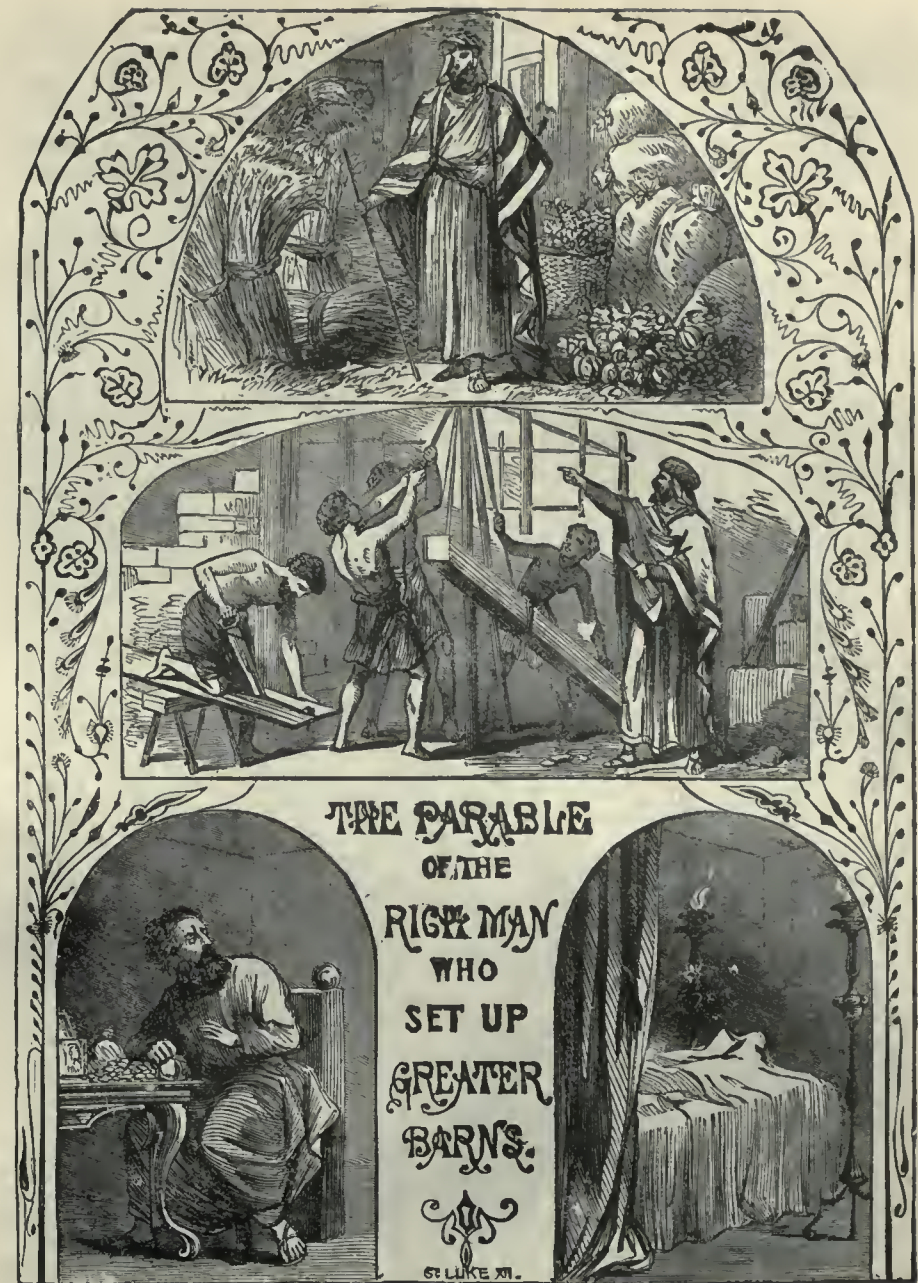


"When the time had come for Him to teach the people more fully about God, and especially about that great revelation of Himself which is contained in His providence and in the arrangement of His Kingdom, in the widest sense of that word, He found Himself constrained to adopt this particular mode of teaching more exclusively, by means of which the mystery of the Kingdom might be enshrined in the most familiar form, a form which can scarcely escape the memory after that faculty has once taken it in, and yet be so enshrined therein as not to be thrust



upon the notice of those incapable of understanding it, while at the same time it invited the thoughtful pondering of those whose hearts were already to some extent enlightened concerning it. If we might be so bold as to compare what passed in our Lord's Sacred Heart with what is noblest and best in the workings and productions of the most gifted of men—

Those whose hearts are beating high
With the pulse of poesy—



we may venture to say that He was fain to pour forth, in some form analogous to the highest song, the thoughts to which the possession of all the knowledge concerning God with which the Sacred Humanity was endowed gave birth. The knowledge thus given to Him . . . was given not for Himself alone, but for us—for the children of the Church throughout all ages; and we may consider those instructions of His, which the Providence of His Father had determined should come down to us in the Gospel narratives, as having been framed for us as well as for



THE RICH GLUTTON
AND LAZARUS THE BEGGAR.

those to whom they were immediately addressed . . . We cannot, then, be far wrong if we venture to approach the parables of our Lord with this thought in our minds—that they contain more, perhaps, than any other part of His teaching, His description of His Father in His dealings with those who belong to Him. Let us allow ourselves to suppose that to these applies, at least as fully as to any other part of His discourses, the text: ‘The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him. . . .’



“The first of all the formal parables, which is also one of those few parables which our Lord Himself has explained in detail, seems at first sight to be a description of the different ways in which the word of God—in whatever form and under whatever dispensation—is received by man. But it is commonly called the Parable of the Sower (St. Matt. xiii. ; St. Mark iv. ; St. Luke viii.), from its first words and from its principal figure, God, who sows His seed broadcast and with so much profusion, and seems, as has so often been remarked, in both His material and His

spiritual creation, to waste so many beginnings which do not come to maturity, for the sake, if we may so speak, of the rich and multiplied beauty and fruitfulness of a few. This law which runs through the whole of God's Kingdom, as far as we know it, suggests many truths concerning Him—His magnificence and liberality, the manner in which even imperfect works, as they seem to us, manifest His glory, the dignity which His grace gives to those who co-operate with it, and the like; while it has a clearer significance when seen working on creations of free beings, who can co-operate with that grace or not, and furnishes a silent commentary on the failure of our Lord's own particular mission of which He had lately been so mournfully complaining. The minute details of the parable, giving so vivid a picture that we almost seem to see the spot near the sea-shore from which every feature of the image may have been taken, are explained by our Lord of the different circumstances under which so much of the Word of God is wasted, while only a part of it takes root in good ground . . .

"The next parable, known as that of the Tares or Cockle (St. Matt. xiii.), tells us still more about the mystery of the Kingdom, for in this not only is the good seed wasted, but bad seed is actually sown, and springs up by the side of the good that is not wasted. How many of the difficulties as to God's providence may not be solved by the simple words, 'Suffer both to grow until the harvest?' . . . The six parables—those of the Seed that grows secretly, of the Grain of Mustard-seed, of the Leaven, of the Hidden Treasure, the Precious Pearl, and the Draw-net—which follow those of the Sower and the Tares, may be considered as completing, each by the addition of some special feature, the picture drawn by our Lord in His general dealings in His Kingdom. God addresses Himself to His creatures, and allows them to accept or refuse Him . . . The image of the grain of mustard-seed seems to represent the outward development and magnificent growth of the work of God in the world, while that of the Leaven explains the law of its growth, which is from within, by the silent spread of the influence of grace . . . It need not be questioned that these parables, like many others, are historical and prophetic. But they come true in history, because they represent the principles on which God works, and these principles are ultimately the echoes and

reflections of His character, His wisdom, His patience, His winning ways with His creatures—that sweetness with which He 'ordereth all things' of which the Scripture speaks . . .

"In the parables of the Pearl and of the Treasure the holy instinct which seeks the pearl comes from Him, and the seeming accident of finding the treasure comes from Him, as well as the grace by which he that finds either pearl or treasure understands its value, and has the courage and prudence to sell all that he has and give it for what he has found . . . Another interpretation of these two parables . . . applies them directly to God, Who seeks or finds human nature, the human soul, the Church, the great body

of His elect, and gives Himself and all that He has in the incarnation to make the treasure or the pearl His own. . . . The primary meaning of the parables may be to represent the action of God in seeking us, the one great ineffable, inexplicable outpouring of love of which Creation is the first fruit, Preservation, Providence, Redemption, Sanctification, and Glorification in the possession of God by the beatific vision forever, the final crown; and the sense which speaks to us of the return of the tide of love from our small and miserable hearts towards God, a return set in motion and guided and maintained by Himself, may be not only true, though secondary, but absolutely involved in and founded on and a part of the first. The parable of the Draw-net comes in at the end of the first series of parables as answering to and in a certain sense balancing the parable of the Sower. For in that first parable we have the image of God scattering His seed at random, as it appears, and submitting to the loss of a great part of it for the sake of the return brought in by that which

takes root in good soil. In the parable of the Draw-net we see that God acts thus for His own purposes, and brings both good and bad within the range of His action, in order that in the end He may select His own and reject those who are not to be His . . . Thus, at the beginning of this series of parables, God is represented as freely offering His grace to men who in various ways reject the good seed; and now at the end of the series, the other side of the truth is put forward, and it is God who rejects and even punishes; for no one is rejected by Him save through fault of his own."

The parable of the Unmerciful Servant (St. Matt. xviii. 21-35) comes between the first and second series of parables.

